

# **Grad School Survival Guide**

The Incomplete Handbook for Surviving the Rough  
Academic Terrain

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# Table of Contents

<i>Preface</i> .....	4
1. What is grad school? .....	6
2. Why did I enter grad school?.....	9
3. Why Go to Grad School?.....	12
4. Grad School Tips.....	15
5. Common grad school terms.....	19
<i>Other helpful articles</i> .....	25
<i>About the author</i> .....	26
<i>Grad School Jungle</i> .....	27

# Preface

Grad school is a jungle! I believe it is. Because of this, I have compiled some of my tips for surviving such rough academic terrain. Some of the tips I provide here are based on personal experience, some from observation, and others collected from classmates and colleagues in grad school.

So if you believe this is the right time for you to go to grad school, this may be a helpful resource for you. If not, then I ask you to pass it on to someone you believe would benefit from this book.

Thanks!

**Mike Arieh Medina**

*There are two mistakes one can make along the road to truth  
- not going all the way, and not starting.*

***Buddha***

## Chapter 1

# **What is grad school?**

Estelle M. Phillips and Derek S. Pugh in *“How to get a PhD”* (Open University Press) provided a background why graduate studies exist in our educational system:

A bachelor’s degree traditionally means that the holder had finished general education. However, in modern times this degree has

evolved into specialized degrees such as in engineering, the science, the arts etc.

A master's degree means a license to practice. The first master's degrees are given to holders of degrees in theology; this means they are licensed to take a living in the Church. Nowadays, there are master's degrees in almost all disciplines (i.e. computer science, business administration, education, public administration, etc.). This means the holder possesses advanced knowledge in a special field of discipline.

A doctor's degree traditionally was a license to teach in a university. However, in modern times this is not usually the case. There are several doctorate degree holders which do not teach in a university or a college. However, in a university setting, faculty members are encouraged to obtain doctorate courses. The reason for this is what Phillips and Pugh emphasized that a faculty with a doctorate degree should be:

*“...an authority, in full command of the subject right up to the boundaries of current knowledge, and able to extend them. As the highest degree that can be awarded, it proclaims that the recipient is worthy of being listened to as an equal by the appropriate university faculty”.*

Thus, the main reason for entering graduate school is to pursue knowledge. In order to break boundaries we must be able provide new insights into a certain field. We can only do this by focusing on a specific branch of what we have chosen as courses in college. We cannot break boundaries by being too general. A college degree is for general knowledge thus a graduate degree means we are a specialist on a specific field.

## Chapter 2

# **Why did I enter grad school?**

There are actually lots of benefits we could reap out of entering into graduate school. However, these are subjective and thus, depend upon the individual. In order for these to be strong reasons, they have to revolve around the very essence of graduate school. That is to promote the reaching out towards the boundaries of knowledge in your chosen field of discipline. We can only get there by

specialization. That should be the main priority of a student in graduate school.

When we obtain our undergraduate degree, we are equipped with the knowledge needed for us in the workplace. The skills and experience we get from our job were acquired with the help of some of the courses we have taken from college. However, in order to catch up with the times, we have to have advanced knowledge of some sort in order to be more knowledgeable in our chosen field.

Teachers perhaps would want to be more knowledgeable about how to effectively deliver their subject matter to students or maybe wants learn how to run a school or manage it. A business owner may want to learn modern trends in management. A government employee may want to be an effective public servant by being

knowledgeable about concepts in public administration. These are some of the reasons or instances in an undergraduate degree holder's life that pushes them to obtain a graduate education. There is only one word that describes this, specialization.

I want to specialize! I want to learn more than what I have right now! I want to be ahead of the others in this field! I'm not contented with what I have learned in college! College education is just too general! Is there more knowledge out there waiting to be discovered by me? These are voices that were ringing inside my head after I finished college. These were the exact words that became my reasons for entering graduate school. And if you are hearing the same words right now, then you have taken the first step in entering graduate school.

## Chapter 3

# Why Go to Grad School?

The most common reasons for going to graduate school are the following:

**To specialize.** Some wants to narrow down their knowledge on a specific subject. Biology graduates would want to specialize in specific biological fields such as ecology, taxonomy, or biotechnology. Some

business graduates may want to specialize in marketing, entrepreneurship, or financial management. Specialization through grad school is faster than specializing through work experience.

**To have a higher pay.** Most job promotions are based on educational qualifications. Master's or doctor's degree entails a higher pay. Just ask your professors.

**Networking.** You will meet different people in grad school. It is an opportunity for you to widen your circle of friends.

**Personal Achievement.** Grad school education doesn't just teach you pure knowledge of concepts and principles in your field. Some values that you will learn through it are patience,

perseverance, hard work, and professionalism. Once you earn a degree, you will be able to gain more self confidence.

You may have your own reasons for going to grad school. It doesn't matter as long as you are determined to finish your degree!

## **Grad School Tips**

1. **Create a timeline for finishing your degree.** A Gantt chart would be a great solution for this. This will give you a broad perspective on what you will be doing for the next 3 years or so in your life in grad school.

**2. Choose the best grad school for you.** Do you like to live near your school? Is it okay for you to travel regularly? What type of professors would you want to teach you? What type of classmates/peers do you want? What types of programs do you want to enroll in? Can I afford financing my graduate education? These are some of the questions you have to answer first in choosing what school is best for you.

**3. Ask support from your family.** Be it financial, material, or moral support, you definitely need them as you go through trials in grad school.

**4. Be computer literate.** Grad school is now modernized through the use of computers. Professors communicate through email now. They send soft copies of lessons instead of printed ones. Sometimes

you have to submit only electronic copies of research papers. You will also be tasked to present topics in class of which knowledge in PowerPoint is a must.

5. **Socialize.** Be friends with peers/classmates. They will be your allies in the coming years.

6. **Manage your files efficiently.** In grad school, you will accumulate tons of paper in no time. Handouts, lecture notes, photocopied books, journal articles, etc. Create a good filing system for these so that you can easily retrieve them in the future. Think about your school library. That's how you should manage it. I promise you will have a library at home after grad school.

**7. Start studying independently.** You won't get much group study sessions from grad school. All your peers are busy too. Plus teacher driven lectures are not as many as in college. In fact some courses have no lectures. So learn to study on your own.

## Chapter 5

# **Common grad school terms**

To get you started with your journey through grad school, here are ten of the most common acronyms and jargons used by grad students and professors:

## **A.B.D.**

This means “All But Dissertation”. This refers to a PhD student who has passed all his/her academic course requirements except dissertation. (Juan de la Cruz, PhD (ABD). Same with C.A.R. Below.

## **Academic master's degrees**

This refers to the Master of Arts (M.A.) and Master of Science (M.S.) degrees on specific disciplines. This is the prerequisite to the doctorate degrees.

## **Candidate**

A student who is currently working on his/her graduate degree.  
(Juanito de la Cruz, MBA Candidate)

## **C.A.R**

Means “Complete Academic Requirements”. A grad student who has finished all the needed academic course requirement except the thesis or dissertation. (Juana de la Cruz, M.P.A. (CAR). See Also A.B.D.

## **Compre**

A term used for the “Comprehensive Exam”, an exam prepared by select professors in order to test your competencies as grad students given the coursework you have experienced. This could either be a written or oral exam or both.

## **Defense**

This refers to an oral presentation to a panel of professors. In here you present a summary of your thesis or dissertation including your results, conclusions and recommendations. Questions are given by the panel regarding your study.

## **Dissertation**

This is another name for thesis (See Below). However, dissertation is to a doctorate degree as thesis is to a master's degree. (In the U.K. and Australia, these terms are interchanged)

## **Refresher Course**

An academic course you have to enroll in after a long period of absence from grad school. It is meant to “refresh” your mindset on graduate school. This will also mean that “a lot of things have changed while you’re gone, so better catch up on it”.

## **Ph.D.**

This means doctor of philosophy. This is an advanced degree after a master's degree. This requires long years of coursework and a dissertation.

## **Thesis**

In one sentence this refers to “a long research paper”. This is mostly required for a master's and a must for a doctorate degree (dissertation). This is an academic masterpiece, your original and significant contribution to the knowledge in your discipline.

## **Other helpful articles**

Here are additional resources which might be helpful once you step into the premises of grad school. This can be viewed in my blog [Grad School Jungle](#).

[Computer: a grad student's best friend](#)

[Top 5 Computer Tips for Grad Students](#)

[Using Wikipedia for research in grad school](#)

[How to use Wikipedia \(without citing it\)](#)

[Surviving grad school: Army style](#)

[Why should a grad student blog?](#)

[Top 10 time wasters for a grad student](#)

[5 time saving tips for grad students](#)

# About the Author



**Mike Arieh Medina** is an evaluation and research consultant for development programs by profession. He was formerly a professor in environmental science and teaches research and statistics courses.

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Check out his blog, [Grad School Jungle](http://gradschooljungle.blogspot.com) a site about life and survival in graduate school at <http://gradschooljungle.blogspot.com>

# Grad School Jungle



Grad School Jungle is an academic blog started in March 2008 by **Mike Arie Medina**. It was originally meant to cover environmental and development topics for his PhD academic papers. Later on, in September 2010, Mike felt the need of graduate students to have certain resources that would provide them with ways on how to focus on their studies by acquiring information that would motivate them in finishing their graduate degree. Thus, Grad School Jungle now included posts on news, articles, tips and other motivational materials for grad students in general. Furthermore, college students and teachers were also able to benefit from the information posted in the blog. This eBook, **Grad School Survival Guide: the Incomplete Handbook for Surviving the Rough Academic Terrain** is a compilation of a series of blog posts which was published in Grad School Jungle.